

**Rev. Lecia Beck**

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**Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana**

### **Saying "Yes" to the Spirit**

#### **Acts 16:9-15**

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.

When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

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We continue to celebrate the Resurrection in this Easter season, and we continue to hear from the book of Acts about how ordinary people practice resurrection. Resurrection is more than just a single event, but an invitation into lifelong practice, experiencing new life for ourselves and sharing that new life with others. We heard about how Tabitha practiced resurrection by seeing the widows, just as God sees us. Last Sunday, we heard about how Peter practiced resurrection by proclaiming what God had done. Today, we look to Paul and Lydia and how they practiced resurrection by saying "yes" to the Spirit.

In this season of graduations, it is common to ask young folks about their plans for the future. It is exciting to hear their hopes and dreams for the future. And every time I hear someone's five-year plan, I smile to myself, wondering how long it will last because I would never have imagined my current reality. I have never managed to stick to a five-year plan, or maybe even a one-year plan.

When I graduated from high school, I fully intended to become a mining engineer. I planned to go to college, graduate in four years or less and get a good job that paid well. Two years and three majors later, that plan was scrapped and I found a new five-year plan. After a gap year traveling with a music ministry team, I returned to college to complete a degree in outdoor leadership so I could become an outdoor ministry professional, planning to become a program director at one of our Lutheran Outdoor Ministry sites with hopes to eventually be a camp director.

Yet somehow, here I am, standing in the pulpit at St Thomas Lutheran Church, an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament, serving as your Minister of Youth and Christian Nurture. Every time I thought I knew where I was going, I ended up in a completely different place.

While I was going one way, the Holy Spirit nudged me to go another way. Every time I have said “yes” to the Holy Spirit’s invitation, it has turned my life upside down, but has also brought me new life, a more abundant life than I could ever have imagined.

In our reading today, we hear about Paul, a former Jew who persecuted the early Christ-followers until his own encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus transformed him into a preacher and teacher of the Gospel. Paul was on one of his missionary journeys with Silas and Timothy, sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ beyond the bounds of Jerusalem, to the ends of the earth as they knew it. Paul had worked out his itinerary, he had found the most efficient way to go, and yet the Holy Spirit had forbidden them to proclaim the Gospel. Paul’s careful plans were falling apart.

I imagine his relief when he had this vision of a man from Macedonia, asking him to come. After being blocked and frustrated, he would finally be able to go somewhere to speak the word of God like he had planned. Paul thought he was going one way, but the Holy Spirit led him in another direction - and he said yes to that new invitation.

Based on his vision, when Paul came to Philippi in Macedonia, I’m sure he was looking for the man from his vision who had pleaded for him to come and help them. This was the proverbial needle in a haystack - how do you find an unknown man in an unknown city? Even though he did not know he was in the right place, on the Sabbath Paul was led to preach along the river, where folks had gathered for worship outside the city gates. The person he found and preached to was a woman who was not actually Macedonian, but from the area which they had previously come from, one of the places where they had not been able to preach.

In charting his missionary journey, Paul said “yes” to the invitation of the Spirit, and Lydia was able to hear the Gospel and respond. Lydia was a business woman. As a dealer of luxury goods, she was respected and could provide for her household, yet when she heard the Gospel, she knew she needed this promise of grace, of resurrected life.

Lydia said “yes” to the Spirit, experiencing resurrection for herself and leading her whole household to be baptized. She continued to say “yes” by extending hospitality to Paul and his companions. Lydia practiced resurrection by saying “yes” to the Spirit.

In their book *Three Big Questions that Change Every Teenager*, youth ministry researchers Kara Powell and Brad Griffin describe ‘discipleship as our everyday “yes” to Jesus. When we follow Jesus, we say “one big yes” followed by a thousand “little yeses” each day...God’s first word to us is “Yes,” and in response, our yes is to look toward God and ask, “What today?”’ (p76-77)

At baptism, God said “yes” to each and every one of us. God’s “yes” resounds in our lives and in our world - no matter whether we respond or not.

But we practice resurrection by saying “yes” to the Spirit, not just once but time and time again. Our whole life of discipleship, of following Christ, is characterized by saying “yes” to the Holy Spirit, following God’s way even when it contradicts the way we had planned to go.

But how do we hear the invitations of the Holy Spirit in our lives?

Sometimes we hear the voice of God as the still, small voice like Elijah.

Sometimes the call of God comes in a burning bush like Moses saw.

Sometimes God speaks through others, speaking the Good News to me.

Sometimes the invitation of God comes rushing like a mighty wind or a roaring fire like at Pentecost.

The invitations of the Holy Spirit are around us, though it takes practice to hear. Some days, I am well attuned, while other days I am wrapped up in my own will, oblivious to God’s presence and guidance.

But when we hear a voice or nudge, how do we know it is the Holy Spirit?

When I hear someone claim divine inspiration, that God told them to do something, I am often skeptical. It can be too easy to moralize our preferences and claim divine authority to back up what we already planned to do, what we already decided was right.

In so many debates of our age, we hear people claiming to speak for God or that their position is the only one that could possibly be a true Christian and sometimes it’s a stance with which I cannot agree.

While this feels like a question we may not be able to answer, I believe there are some ways that we can “test the Spirits,” some ways we can know what God’s will is in different situations. (1 John 4:1)

In his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed, Martin Luther wrote: [The Holy Spirit] calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the whole Christian church...the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sin...[and] on the last day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give...eternal life.

So, when we are discerning the invitations of the Holy Spirit, there are questions we can ask.

For example, what calls and gathers? As we heard last week, we can look for what expands boundaries and welcome and know that is the work of the Holy Spirit. Actions that discount others, draw lines and serve to keep others out are not from God. When we draw a line between us and them, we usually find Jesus on the other side, standing with those we call “other”.

Then, what makes us holy? Not in a holier-than-thou sort of way, but in a way that reflects God’s holiness, that brings wholeness to those around us. God is at work restoring our world and the Spirit invites us to join in.

Next, what gives freedom from sin? Any action meant to bind people deeper to their sin is not from the Spirit. Just as Jesus said to the people when he raised Lazarus from the dead, he continues to say to us, "Unbind him!"

Finally, what brings life? From the very beginning, God's Spirit has been part of creating and bringing life - that which does not bring life to God's creation is not of God.

We don't have to figure this out alone - this is why we are the church, beloved. We test the spirits together, we listen for the call of the Spirit together, for our individual lives and for our life together as the church.

We know that it is the Holy Spirit which gathers us to Christ, brings us to true faith and gives us the courage to follow. It can be a wild ride, upending our plans for ourselves, but I pray that we may be filled by the power of the Risen Christ so that we can practice resurrection by saying "yes" to the Spirit.

Easter 6C

Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22--22:5; John 14:23-29; John 5:1-9